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Claire Sterling

The Attack on the Pope: There's More to the Story

ROME—The attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II has now been the subject of two lengthy articles in The Washington Post by Michael Dobbs. The second, published July 22, contains numerous omissions or misstatements of considerable substance. The record ought to be set straight. Since there isn't space to cover all the points, I will elaborate here only on the most important.

Confusion begins with the article's headline: "Probers Divided Over Evidence in Pope Attack." Of course, Dobbs did not write the headline. Those described as "divided," far from being "probers," turn out to be "many magistrates and lawyers not directly involved with the case." Regrettably, Dobbs does not add that there is no discernible disagreement among the half-dozen magistrates who do have some involvement in the case.

This omission is particularly noticeable in regard to Ferdinando Imposimato, marginally involved but perhaps the most experienced Italian judge in the field. Dobbs hints that Imposimato is really among the disbelievers. But Imposimato has told Rome reporters repeatedly that he believes the essentials of Mehmet Ali Agca's confession. On July 24, for example, he said, "To back up his story, which has some small errors in timing, as anybody would after a long time lapse, Agca added untrue details. But the substance of his story is all true."

Early on, Dobbs shows a curious ignorance of how this investigation developed. "Although Italian investigators initially concluded that Agca had acted alone, [Judge Ilario] Martella reopened the case in November 1981," he writes.

There is a shady ring to that, as if the investigation might somehow have been contrived after something was cooked up to investigate. In reality, Italian investigators had "documented proof that Agca did not act alone" within 48 hours of the shooting. This was said on May 15, 1981, by the first magistrate to interrogate Agca—who was not Domenico Sica, as Dobbs asserts, but Luciano Infelisi.

The existence of an elaborate plot was confirmed dramatically soon after Agca's trial that July. The two distinguished judges presiding, Severino Santiapichi and Antonio Abbate, filed a Statement of Motivation for his life sentence on Sept. 24, 1981, saying: "Everything points to the conclusion that Agca was no more than the emerging point of a deep conspiracy, complex and threatening, orchestrated by secret forces carefully planned and directed down to the smallest detail."

It was because of this strong statement that the investigation was reopened six weeks later: not by Judge Martella, who had no such powers, but by Rome's attorney general, who named him.

While describing Martella as "a meticulous magistrate," Dobbs lends considerable credence to the Bulgarian argument that Agca learned many (or most) of the details about his three alleged Bulgarian accomplices by reading the papers. "Allegations about a 'Bulgarian connection' . . . were first published in Reader's Digest in August 1982," Dobbs writes; "the Italian press had carried extensive articles" about other nefarious Bulgarian activities in the country.

Actually, the Reader's Digest article, which I wrote, contains nothing about the three Bulgarians in question because, at the time, I had not heard of them. No reporter had an inkling of their existence until Sergei Antonov was arrested three months later.

Even after that event, the Italian press had never carried some of the most persuasive details provided by Agca, verified later by witnesses or police investigations: precise interior details of both Antonov's and Todor Aivazov's apartments; Antonov's personal habits and hobbies; the nearly invisible warts on Maj. Zhelio Vasilev; Aivazov's dentures.

Such details, all subsequently verified, took on special importance when, on June 28, 1983, Agca suddenly retracted a number of statements he had made to Judge Martella over the previous year. While Dobbs dwells on the retraction, he fails to note prosecutor Antonio Albano's explanation for finding it "unconvincing and indeed a contrast with objective evidence." Practically everything Agca tried to take back had been substantiated already, and not a single point in the retraction changed the basic lines of Agca's story.

Specifically, Agca has never denied knowing all three of the accused Bulgarians in Rome and acting on their orders. Nor—apart from withdrawing a claim of carrying arms and explosives to the scene—has he taken back a word about the plotting with the same three and a fourth Bulgarian (Ivan Tomov Dontchev) to assassinate Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa.

A cornerstone of the Italian prosecutor's case was the revelation that a special truck had left the Bulgarian embassy grounds in Rome shortly after the papal shooting. According to Albano, it was presumed to have waited there for Agca (who was caught and arrested instead) and was to have taken off to the border with an accomplice of Agca. Citing the Bulgarian's defense counsel, Dobbs presents an Italian customs official named Maurizio Lucchetta, who swore that embassy treasurer Todor Aivazov was with him (and the truck) at the fateful hour. The whole episode provided Aivazov with a supposedly ironclad alibi.

Dobbs does indicate prosecutor Albano's warning about accepting Lucchetta's story. But the prosecutor's report contains more than a warning. It was an unqualified statement rejecting Lucchetta's testimony. "The alibi presented by Aivazov for May 13 and indications he gave for May 11 and 12 are not only unconfirmed but contradicted by authentic and unimpeachable documents, and the testimony of six disinterested witnesses, other customs officials included, who affirmed with certainty that the hours, dates and circumstances specified by Aivazov for his alibi are completely different." The six witnesses, including customs officials, are all named, the only group of witnesses to be given such importance in his report.

Claire Sterling, a writer based in Europe, is author of "The Time of the Assassins" and a recent lengthy article in The New York Times, both of which explore—and argue—a connection of the Bulgarian government with the attempted assassination of the pope.

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BEAT THE DEVIL.

ALEXANDER COCKBURN

Poper Scooper

How does *The New York Times* now plan to cover the Agca case? A few weeks ago, at the express command of A.M. Rosenthal, *The Times* ran, across two pages, Claire Sterling's overheated and selective digest of the prosecution's case for a supposed K.G.B.-Bulgarian link in a plot to kill the Pope. Since it has been tireless in recent months in exposing purported lapses in journalistic ethics and decorum, many wondered how the paper could justify using Sterling as a reporter. She has been a major exponent in the plot theory and has profited mightily, along with former C.I.A. officer Paul Henze, therefrom.

The case against the plot has always been strong, and there are those (me) who named Bulgarian martyr to cold war hysteria Sergei Antonov—still rotting in a Roman cell—Prisoner of Conscience for 1983. But since the publication of prosecutor Antonio Albano's brief, mainstream reporters, no doubt irked by the Sterling "scoop," have been taking another look at the case.

Among them is Michael Dobbs of *The Washington Post*. Dobbs's latest dispatch flatly challenges the Sterling thesis:

§ Agca's repeated claims that he went to St. Peter's Square the day before the shooting with Antonov and co-Bulgarian Todor Aivasov are contradicted by the sworn testimony of an Italian customs official, Maurizio Lucchetta, who insists that he was with Aivasov on customs business in another part of Rome at the time. He has produced documentary evidence to back up the claim.

§ Sterling and the prosecutor (the two are impossible to distinguish) have made great play of the famous sealed truck that allegedly bore Agca's Turkish colleague Oral Celik out of the country minutes after the attack on the Pope. It now turns out that this truck, sealed by the Italian customs hours before the gunplay, was parked in a public street outside the Bulgarian Embassy in full view of Italian merchants, who were no doubt reading Mario Cuomo's diaries in the peace and quiet of their stores. By the Albano/Sterling scenario, the Bulgarians had to have broken the customs' seals, shoved in the rascally Turk and resealed the truck, all in front of those merchants. Surely even Cuomo's works lack this magnetism.

§ Albano/Sterling exult over the fact that Agca knew the Bulgarians' home telephone numbers, which he said had been given to him in Sofia in the summer of 1980. That may be, but the numbers were, in fact, available from the Rome phone directory which Agca has admitted he looked at in jail after his conviction, when he was in the process of developing his account of the plot. He also had full access to newspapers and television while divulging his accounts of his own role in the plot. Thus, as he now admits, his encyclopedic knowledge of the layout of Antonov's apartment came from the media.

In the March/April issue of *Problems of Communism*, put out by the United States Information Agency, there is an interesting review by William Hood of Sterling's *The Time of the Assassins* and Henze's *The Plot to Kill the Pope*. Hood is a veteran of the O.S.S. and then the C.I.A. and is a loyal servant of the flag. He is scathing about the "plot" and concludes with this rather emphatic hint:

> Curiously, neither Sterling nor Henze adequately credits the possibility that Western intelligence already has even some slight access to Bulgarian or Soviet secrets. . . . in view of the skepticism and apparent lack of interest in the attempted assassination expressed by various Western intelligence services, it is not out of the question to suggest that the real (and rather unsensational) story may actually be known—but cannot be disclosed because the sources must be protected.